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Prospective English language teachers' views on literature in their teacher education curriculum and its potential value

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Abstract

Foreign language teachers use literary texts in their classrooms for their potential practical uses among which the existence of their enriched lexis is the leading one. Still, much research is needed to map and develop literature teaching in foreign language classrooms in Turkey. In this study, views of prospective English language teachers on literature and its place in their teacher education curriculum are studied. Eighty-four second and third year prospective teachers of English participated in this study. A five point Likert-type scale including 24 questions was developed and the reliability of the scale was found to be .962, pointing at the scale's high internal reliability. The findings indicated that 78% of the prospective teachers have positive feelings about literature courses in their teacher education programs. In terms of the genres, although accepting the novel and short story as important genres, majority of them do not think that poetry is an important genre that can be used in EFL classrooms. Although most of the participants believe that literature courses help learning about the target culture while developing students' lexis, in terms of language skills, they do not fully agree that speaking can be developed by means of literature.

Keywords: Literature, Teacher Education, ELT , Extensive Reading, Curriculum.

Introduction

In Turkey, research on literature teaching in foreign language classrooms seems to have started in 1990s with the appearance of position-based articles rather than data-based studies which would assess the effect of literature teaching on learning a foreign language. Ertuğrul (1995) stated that advanced learners of English always enjoy good literature although they may not understand literary texts completely. As she further explored, students need to develop their literary competence in order to understand symbolic meanings found in literary works. From another corner, it has been articulated that poetry contributes to students' learning of rhythm and sound system (Çubukçu, 2001a; Hişmanoğlu, 2005) while motivating students as learners (Ertuğrul, 1995). In 1990s, despite such research that supported the use of literature in EFL classrooms, newer curricula decreased the weekly load of literature courses which, as Türker (1995) stated, should have been accepted as an important part of curricula at all levels of instruction. Akyel (1995) argued that despite the fact that poetry contains valuable language for EFL students, teachers do not seem to be interested in using poetry in their classrooms largely because of not having adequate knowledge of the language of poetry.

Genres and genre identification are necessary for EFL teachers who would use literature in their classrooms because of the potential practical uses of each genre which separates it from the others. As Ertuğrul (1995) specifies, although short stories are brief and time saving while being economical in language and imagery, poetry is

characterized by strong imagery and by containing stress and rhythm. As she further articulates, drama can be very useful because of the fact that it includes dialogues that are the building blocks of everyday conversational language. Although she argues that length of novels is a major concern in their applicability, it can be claimed that novels can be used for outside the class reading often, called “breath reading” or “extensive reading” both of which aim that students read as many books as possible within their life time.

Previous research on fourth year prospective English language teachers’ relationship with literature shows that almost all prospective teachers think that literature courses are a necessary component of their English language teacher education curriculum (Arikan, 2005). Although not particularly used in Turkish EFL contexts, newer approaches to teaching and learning with literature in Turkey has also been mentioned as a potentially important source that may enhance language learning. Çubukçu (2001b), Ünlü (2002) and Arikan (2008), for example, call for making use of literary theory as an alternative to language-based approaches to teaching literature. Furthermore, Kartal and Arikan (2010) and Arikan (2008) propose that computer technology such as the Internet should be used in the teaching of literature along with traditional classroom-based activities. Similarly, Arikan (2008) infers from the data he studied that using computer technology in the learning of American and British literatures has many advantages mainly because the students are interested in working with the tools provided by the virtual world.

Aforementioned studies produced in Turkey show that much research is needed to map and develop literature teaching in foreign language classrooms. In this study, in order to find out the views of prospective English language teachers on literature and its place in their teacher education curriculum, the following research questions were set:

1. What are prospective ELT teachers’ views on literature?
2. What are their views on literature courses in teacher education curriculum?
3. What are their views on using literature in English language classes at all levels?

METHODOLOGY

A total number of 84 participants participated in the study all of whom were second and third year prospective teachers of English. A statistical package was used to calculate the frequencies, percentages, mean scores, standard errors and standard deviations. The scale was a five point Likert-type scale including 24 questions that were prepared by the researchers. The internal reliability of the scale was calculated and it was found to be .962, suggesting that the scale could be considered to have high internal reliability. While analyzing the data, “strongly agree” and “agree” statements and “strongly disagree” and “disagree statements” were grouped and calculated together and mean scores, standard errors and standard deviations were used to find answers to the research questions set.

FINDINGS

The results of this study are given below under each heading that mentions the related research question.

Table 1. Prospective ELT teachers’ views on literature

ITEMS	Negative %	Positive %	Mean	SE	SD
I enjoy literature.	22	78	2.835	.068	.654
Studying literature is boring.	72.5	27.5	2.219	.086	.827
I think reading literature is a free time activity.	46.2	53.8	2.516	.078	.750
I have difficulty in understanding literature.	55	45	2.395	.079	.758
I learn the target language better with literature.	25.3	74.7	2.813	.071	.681

In terms of the attitudes towards literature, the findings indicate that 78% of the prospective teachers have positive feelings and only 27.5% believe that literature studies are boring. Almost 54% of the participants think that literature is a free time activity, 45% of them have difficulty in understanding literature. Despite the participants' evaluation of finding literature difficult, 74.7% claim that they learn the target culture better with literature.

Table 2. Views on literature courses in teacher education curriculum

ITEMS	Negative %	Positive %	Mean	SE	SD
1. I will use novels in my future EFL classrooms.	33	77	2.714	.068	.654
2. Taking literature courses is unnecessary for a future ELT teacher.	92.3	7.7	1.824	.057	.549
3. We should know the basic literary genres of short story, poetry, novel, drama. *	14.3	85.7	3.087	.063	.608
4. I will use short stories in my future EFL classrooms.	36.3	63.7	2.725	.068	.650
5. I will use novels in my future EFL classrooms.**	76.9	23.1	2.186	.067	.648
6. Linguistics course is more necessary for a future ELT teacher.	49.5	50.6	2.571	.081	.776
7. There should be compulsory literature courses in our curriculum.	44	56.1	2.659	.078	.748

Findings show that knowing basic literary genres such as poetry, novel drama and short story is important for learners (85.7%). This positive evaluation is also reflected in respondents' answers to the necessity of literature courses. Likewise, the majority of the respondents find literature courses necessary in ELT classes (92.3%). Seventy-seven percent of them claim that they will use novels in their future ELT classes.

The proposition about the best genre in an ELT classroom indicates that 63.7% of the participants will use novels in their future EFL classrooms. On the other hand, only 23.1% believe that they will use novels in their future EFL classrooms. When asked if they would add many compulsory courses to the curriculum, 56.1% of the prospective teachers agreed with the idea and 50.6% of them claimed that linguistic courses were more necessary for a future ELT teacher.

Table 3. Views on using literature in English language classes at all levels

ITEMS	Negative %	Positive %	Mean	SE	SD
1. Teaching reading would be easier if I use literature. *	13.2	86.8	3.065	.064	.611
2. Literature helps learning about the target culture. *	4.4	95.6	3.384	.060	.572
3. Literature educates the whole person psychologically, morally, and culturally. *	15.4	84.6	3.076	.064	.618
4. Literature helps teaching grammar in an indirect manner.	19.8	80.2	2.912	.065	.626
5. I think literature is great for teaching and learning vocabulary. *	12.1	87.9	3.076	.062	.600
6. Teaching integrated skills would be easier if I use literature genres.	22	78	2.890	.063	.604
7. Teaching speaking would be easier if I use literature genres.	41.8	58.2	2.560	.075	.718
8. Teaching listening would be easier if I use literature genres.	55	45	2.406	.068	.649
9. Using literature will help the students develop better personalities.	28.6	71.4	2.879	.082	.786
10. Teaching writing would be easier if I use literature genres. *	16.5	83.5	3.022	.066	.632
11. Literature in EFL classes will motivate students.	18.7	81.3	2.846	.056	.535
12. Literature can be confusing for students.	41.8	58.2	2.604	.074	.713

Among all of the participants, 81.3% of them believe that using literature in ELT classes will motivate students. On the other hand, 58.2% of the participants believe that using literature in ELT classes can be confusing. In terms of the evaluation about using literary genres in skills teaching, 86.8% of the respondents point out that teaching

reading would be easier if they use literature, and 87.9% agree that both vocabulary teaching and learning would be easier by using literature. The positive attitude towards literature in the ELT classrooms proceed for writing and integrated skills; the rating for writing is 83.5%. The participants claim that teaching writing would be easier if they use literature in their classes and 78% claim the same thing for the integrated skills teaching. Following that, for grammar, 80.2% of the prospective teachers agree that teaching grammar would help them teach grammar in an indirect manner. Despite participants' positive evaluation of reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar and the integrated skills, it is surprising that they rate speaking and listening's importance as facilitator of teaching English as 58.2% and 45%. Although these are not very low, not many students think that these two skills would be better taught with literature. As for personal development, 84.6% of prospective teachers believe that literature educates the whole person psychologically, morally, and culturally and 71.4% of them claim that students develop better personalities with the help of literature. Learning the culture of the target language is one of the most unavoidable problem in ELT classes. As for the proposition on that item, 95.6% of the participants claim that literature helps learning about the target culture which is a very high rating pointing out the importance of literature in ELT classes from a cultural perspective.

DISCUSSION

Students, overwhelmingly, support the view that literature courses in an ELT classroom is beneficial both in skills and grammar teaching. Thus, literature courses in ELT classrooms must be taken seriously and should be given a special place in teacher education curricula. Hence, our results support the view that incorporating literature into a foreign language teaching program is a powerful source for reflecting the sociolinguistic aspects of the target language (Hişmanoğlu, 2005).

Our results indicate that literature in ELT classes help prospective teachers improve their personalities while educating them as whole persons. As well as its academic appropriateness, it also helps personality growth of the students. Our findings reveal that in terms of culture teaching, a great majority of participants believe that literature is a beneficial tool to learn about the target culture. Literature can act as a powerful change agent by developing pupils' intercultural awareness while at the same time nurturing empathy, a tolerance for diversity, and emotional intelligence (Ghosn, 2002, p.172).

It is the prospective teachers' belief that they will make use of the literary genres in their future ELT classes. As it was rated as a more appropriate genre, short story can be used in ELT classes more often. The findings verify that short story reading is simpler and less complex than other literary genres and for this reason the level of difficulty of literary texts should be taken into consideration while choosing the text to be used in the classroom. The results suggest that the participants find the contents of the poetry to be more difficult. As young learners lose interest very quickly and they are less able to keep their motivation high compared to adult learners, teachers may design some simple activities using literature to use for their young learners (Cameron, 2001).

As the data suggests, these prospective teachers want to have more compulsory literature courses in their curriculum. These results show that the curriculum in ELT departments requires to be examined and arranged according to the needs of the prospective teachers. Our findings further reveal that prospective teachers have positive feelings towards literature and it is easier to teach the target language with the use of literature in their future classes. Results also indicate that using literature in ELT classes is considered to be a highly motivating material for learners. Current literature also supports this in that literature exposes students to complex themes and unexpected uses of language (Lazar, G., 2004).

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